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NEIGHBORHOOD DISCUSSION GROUPS IN RELATION
TO THE FARM SECURITY ADMINISTRATION PROGRAM
IN DELAWARE COUNTY, OKLAHOMA

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Preliminary County-Wide Meeting

Delaware County has had a rather inactive Purchasing and Marketing Association since July 1941. During that time nothing has been done because as one person put it, "Nobody has ever said, 'Let's get going and get together and buy some feed or something.'"

On July 21, 1942, a county-wide meeting was held at Jay, Oklahoma. In attendance were 36 Delaware County farmers, the County Agent, the Indian Agent, a representative of the Delaware County Bank, Delaware County FSA supervisors, and representatives of the regional Community and Cooperative Services Section. This meeting was called for the specific purpose of discussing problems which might be approached through an active purchasing and marketing association.

It was evident from the proceedings that the various agencies in the County were cooperating closely. Discussion of problems brought out that the Farm Security Administration is in a position to lend money to help meet the farmers' needs individually and in groups. Most of the farmers recognized purchasing of feeds and seeds to be the most important items which might be handled through a purchasing and marketing association. However, it was impossible at this meeting to ascertain the volume of business which might be handled by a county-wide association.

As a plan of work it was generally agreed that a series of neighborhood meetings should be held throughout the County to discuss the farmers' problems and major needs and to secure more complete information on the following: (1) The volume of business the farmers would have if they entered into a cooperative purchasing and marketing association; (2) The type of organization the farmers in each neighborhood desired to have set up in the County.

It was planned to hold another county-wide meeting later, at which time all the community delegates would be present with reports and estimates of needs.

The neighborhood discussion group techniques were introduced in this particular situation to facilitate the establishment of a sound basis for cooperative enterprise based on a well-informed and participating membership. It was an attempt to start on the ground and work up to a sound county-wide organization. This seemed particularly desirable in the light of past experiences with other approaches to cooperatives. The following case studies describe briefly four of the neighborhood discussion groups which met for the first time following the preliminary county-wide meeting.

Case Study A

Neighborhood: Unnamed
Community: Fairview
County: Delaware

This neighborhood is unnamed not because it lacks reality in the minds of the farm people but because they have always thought of it as a part of Fairview School District. "Guess you'd call it 'Fairview' but there are three other neighborhoods in Fairview District besides us," was the reply given by one farmer when the question, "What do you call your neighborhood?" was asked.

The first neighborhood discussion group in Delaware County met July 27, 1942, at the home of Mr. and Mrs. John Warren. Mr. Warren had attended the county-wide meeting in Jay on July 21 and had expressed a desire to have his neighbors in to talk over their situation. He thought he could get at least ten families.

The Warren home is located in a mountain hollow off the main county road about one-half mile. It is reached by a winding trail almost impassable to auto travel. The scant fields and farmyard are pressed in on all sides by a wooded growth of oaks, walnuts and sumacs. The house is of unpainted wood with long weatherbeaten oak shingles. The eight members of the Warren family live in the two lower rooms and an attic which is reached by a rung ladder. On the night of the meeting the coal oil lamps cast a warm glow throughout the house. The large family evidently overflowed the house for a bed was located under one of the large oak trees out in the yard; here some of the children slept. 1/

The county farm and home supervisors accompanied by the visitors were met at the turn-in gate by a trio of young boys who appeared unexpectedly in the dim evening light to unhook the gate and allow the car to pass through.

The car proceeded up the lane flanked by a rugged and ancient rail fence on the left and heavy undergrowth on the right. Mr. Warren met it at the edge of the wood lot. One neighbor was already present at 8:50 p.m. The meeting was called for 9:00 p.m.

1/ This description of the situation is indicative of general living conditions throughout the area. The U. S. Census of 1940 revealed that 37 percent of all occupied rural-farm dwellings in Delaware County reported 1.61 or more persons per room compared with 27 percent for Oklahoma. Ninety-five percent of the farm homes in the County are without electric lighting; 98 percent of the homes are in need of major repairs or do not have private baths. Bureau of the Census, Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940, Housing I, Oklahoma, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, 1942, Table 6, p. 32.

After introductions the group fell into casual conversation in the wood lot. Darkness settled in the hollow and the chirping of the crickets increased in volume. Shortly after 9 o'clock another family silently approached the house through the barnyard, each member carrying a hickory-seat chair. The women and younger children shied off to the house and were welcomed by Mrs. Warren, the men collecting in the wood lot some distance from the house. Very little attempt was made to introduce the women to the visitors or to the other men.

At 9:10 the county farm supervisor turned to Mr. Warren and said, "John, is this all that's coming? Don't you think we ought to get started?"

"Nope! They'll be along pretty soon. They said they would."

This dialogue in its essentials was repeated at intervals of about 10 to 15 minutes during the next 40 minutes. Additional families continued to arrive until 9:50 when Mr. Warren finally said, "Well, they're all here now. Guess we can start." 2/

Mr. Warren guided the group to his front yard where he had prepared three long benches out of solid oak bridge planking set upon some logs. These he had arranged in a circle. The whole arrangement showed real thought and careful planning on the part of the farm host. The planks had been carefully placed before anyone arrived. There was little opportunity for any one individual to stand out and this undoubtedly had a desirable influence on the subsequent discussion. The women came out of the house with their chairs and took a place against the house where they could hear the menfolk. Two men, although invited into the circle, chose to sit on the logs on the outer circumference of the circle at some distance from the main group.

2/ From this it became evident that the farmer who invited his neighbors to the meeting had in fact assumed the major responsibility for the meeting and had received definite commitments from the neighbors that they would attend.

Later on he emphasized to the county staff that he was sure he could get his neighbors to come. Thus self-confidence was engendered where it was needed most. The county supervisor pointed out that Mr. Warren was the only FSA borrower in attendance, that he was "just an average" client and that he (the supervisor) was frankly surprised that he was able to conduct the meeting as well as he did.

Later one of the younger farmers remarked that he was often assisted by Mr. Warren in planning his farm operations. All in all he was just a good neighbor.

Mr. Warren's front yard was reached by a 6-foot high wood stile. All late comers were faced with the necessity of climbing this entryway with all faces turned in curious attention upon them. All were obviously self-conscious, as they made their way up the far side, through an arbor at the top, and down the near side to be welcomed finally in the inner yard.

All of the families lived within a radius of 2 miles and all but two of them walked to the meeting. When asked where they lived, the usual reply was, "About a half mile 'cross the holler." Roads were the long way around and doubled the distances, so they walked across.

The county supervisor stood up 3/ and opened the meeting by emphasizing how important it was to the farmers of Delaware County to have feed for their livestock. The usual farming practice was to have hogs and cattle as a chief source of cash income, with a few dairy cows, some chickens and, finally, a little fruit such as apples, peaches, or berries. He stressed the great reliance on livestock and the importance of corn, barley, oats, lespedeza and wild pasture as the main sources of feed.

Then he turned the meeting over to Mr. Massey of the regional FSA office, who relinquished it to Mr. Warren. Mr. Warren very briefly stated that he had been up to the general meeting in Jay week before last and had heard some of their problems discussed. He liked the idea of calling in his neighbors to discuss their problems and see if they could get together on something. He thought he could get at least 10 of them to come and was most pleased with the turn-out.

Mr. Massey then explained FSA's position in relation to the farm families. He stated that FSA was anxious to help either individuals or groups of farmers when, and only when, farmers themselves recognize a need for assistance. He explained that the reason for his visit was to find out what the local problems were, what plans neighbors had for meeting them, and what specific things FSA could do to help.

He introduced Mr. Longmore of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics as an observer from the research part of the Department of Agriculture. Mr. Longmore sketched briefly the ideas back of neighborhood discussion groups and asked a few questions about the ways in which people worked together in this neighborhood.

Then Mr. Massey opened the meeting to general discussion from the group. Many expressions of the need for cooperation or "getting

3/ By standing up the county supervisor contributed to a general air of formality which is not conducive to open discussion. Perhaps a more detached position could have been assumed by the county supervisor if he had let the farmer at whose home they were gathered open the meeting.

together" were made. The lack of transportation and the increasing need for farmers to pool their shipments both into and out of the neighborhood was discussed.

Most of the farmers present needed some feed for dairy and range cattle. They expressed the belief that they could save money by buying together and engaged in a lively discussion of possible ways that might be used to find out how much of the various feeds the neighborhood needed. Finally one of the men who had taken a position outside the circle and who up to this time had been only listening to the general discussion "let go" with a lusty discharge of tobacco juice which seemed to bring the entire group to attention and said, "Just 'pears to me that all a person would have to do would be to get a piece of paper and go 'round to each farmer and say, 'How much feed you need?' and then put it down on the paper and let 'er go at that." This was the only contribution made by this particular individual during the entire evening but it served to bring the discussion on this subject to a head. The group decided that another meeting was necessary so that each farmer could estimate his own needs and be able to report to the group. 4/

By this time a full moon had appeared over the mountain, adding a natural light to the setting and accompanied by a grey haze from the hills and clearing. The cabin, the hunched group of men, the wooded hills, the rail fences - all were silhouetted against the fast-rising moon.

An old-timer began to talk about the days, long past, when there were fewer people in the hills than now but they "stuck together." He recalled how, right on this very farm, some 200 people gathered one day back in 1896 or 1896 and put up the rail fence which still exists. "How long did it take? Just one day! The women folk prepared the meals and quilted. Seemed like nobody did much work," he said. A few nodded their heads and said, "That's right." 5/

4/ This is a simple illustration of how farmers through an informal discussion group can (1) recognize problems, (2) agree on some practical approach, and (3) take definite and concrete steps to bring about a solution.

5/ With such a heritage of neighborly cooperation it is difficult to see why these families have neglected this phase of living so markedly. Very little cooperative effort is made at present and the farm families recognize this. They talk of the "good old times when everyone helped everyone else." They say they need to cooperate with each other and they are sincerely willing to try and work together on some common endeavor.

The county supervisor cogently remarked that many people are afraid of "cooperatives" because they connect them with Communism!

They talked about the need for a row binder. It was brought out that no individual farmer had enough acreage to justify a binder but it was suggested that three or four might get together and make use of it. Labor for harvesting their feed crops was going to be needed soon and labor was getting scarce. Someone suggested pooling their family labor.

One young fellow said, "I'm just married and starting in farming 'cross the holler. Seems to me FSA could help me out if they would 'low me to buy some hens and chickens and a few hogs. Just something to get me started on."

The county supervisor suggested the need of a feed cutter so that they could make silage. This met with little approval. The group just didn't see the need for a feed cutter or row binder. The decision was not put to a vote but it was openly and democratically discussed and the arguments against the suggestion seemed conclusive (at least to the majority of those present).

Subsequent discussion revealed that practically every family needed a few bushels of peaches for home canning and they immediately saw the possibilities of combining purchases so that they could get a trucker to come in with a load of peaches.

The need most frequently mentioned appeared to be that of purchasing livestock feed. It was suggested that the neighborhood concentrate on this problem for the present. Organization of the neighborhood group was discussed and the advisability of electing a chairman and secretary was acknowledged. Furthermore, if the members were to get together with other neighborhoods they needed someone to represent them at a "bigger meeting." At this point one farmer suggested that they hold a meeting at Fairview School rather than in the home. 6/ But someone objected that if groups are too large people don't talk and discuss things like they do in such meetings as this out in the

6/ The farmer making this suggestion was a more recent arrival in the neighborhood and a relatively big livestock feeder. He and his wife were the only family members who came by automobile. It did not require much observation to see that there was little common feeling between him and the rest of the farmers present. At first his wife remained in the car but when the discussion got under way her curiosity got the better of her and she joined the group, running the gauntlet of the entire assembly as she climbed over the 6-foot stile and took a seat beside her husband, the only woman in the circle.

This individual was later elected temporary chairman of the group. It was made clear that the election was only temporary however. He was generally acknowledged by outsiders such as the county agent, county supervisors and others as the real leader in the neighborhood. There is no doubt that his economic status, which was considerably above that of most of his neighbors, had something to do with this.

yard. Someone else pointed out that if they elected a delegate to meet with delegates from other neighborhoods he could express their needs and conclusions and then report back. In this way everyone, even the "little fellow," would have a chance to say something.

After this discussion a temporary chairman and secretary were elected but action was deferred on the delegate because it was realized that this was a responsibility which should not be considered lightly. As one of the group put it, "Between now and next Friday we'll talk this thing over out in the cornpatch or in the woods and we'll kind of settle on who we want for our delegate."

The discussion lasted until almost midnight with an occasional interruption from a neighbor's jack braying in the distance, or the prolonged howling of some hounds down the hollow.

After deciding to meet again the following Friday night the meeting adjourned but the group seemed loath to break up and continued for a time in earnest discussion. One neighbor remarked that it was the first time they had ever been over at the Warren's and they certainly were glad to get acquainted. Mrs. Reed, a neighbor whose husband is a prosperous stock farmer, raised the question as to how far this type of cooperation could go and whether it could be extended into the home phases of farming. 7/ The question was asked why more of the wives were not present. Someone replied that most of them had large families which required the constant services of the mother at home. Apparently the chief recreation for the children is going to church and informal play with other children.

It was 12:30 a.m. before the discussion finally broke up. As they were leaving, Mr. Warren chided the visitors for doubting that he would be able to get a few of his neighbors out. As he said, "You folks thought it would be hard to get 10 families but I got 16!" 8/

7/ Later the county supervisor reported that only 22 wives of the 360 FSA borrowers in the County attend Extension Home Demonstration clubs; only 46 young people from FSA families are 4-H club members.

8/ Of the 16 families present, only 1 (Mr. Warren) was a FSA borrower. This is to be explained by the fact that the cooperative enterprise was promoted as an over-all organization involving all farm people in the County. This exemplifies the high degree of collaboration of all agencies working with farmers in the County. No attempt was made to plan the series of meetings to include areas in which there were large concentrations of FSA borrowers. As a matter of fact Mr. Warren was the only FSA borrower within a radius of several miles. A statistical analysis of the 4 neighborhood discussion groups described here shows that of the 38 families represented in all the meetings only 12, or 32 percent, were FSA borrowers. In the County as a whole FSA borrowers comprise approximately 13 percent of the total number of farmers.

Case Study B

Neighborhood: Unnamed
Community: All
County: Delaware

When someone asks a farmer in this neighborhood where he is from he usually replies, "All district." He means that the family lives in one of the four neighborhoods in All School District. The neighborhood does not have a separate name.

Following the preliminary county-wide meeting Mr. and Mrs. Ryburn invited their neighbors to come to a meeting in their home on the night of July 29, 1942. Of 10 families invited only 3 failed to come. Four of the eight families attending were FSA borrowers. The meeting was called for 9:00 p.m. but did not actually start until 9:30. All families walked to the meeting. The Ryburns had arranged chairs in a circle on the well-kept lawn. The night was fair and soon almost everyone was stretched out on the grass or sitting comfortably in a chair. The preliminary visiting was instrumental in "breaking the ice." The women brought out chairs from the house and sat outside of the circle of men but close enough to hear.

The county supervisor and the farmer host went off to the pump to get a drink just before the meeting started. This gave the supervisor an opportunity to tell Mr. Ryburn to "just start your meeting when you feel like it and tell the group why you have invited them in." 1/

Mr. Ryburn opened the meeting with a short talk on the need for neighborly cooperation and unified action. His remarks were to the point and well done. He came close to a summary statement of what a cooperative could do for the farmers of Delaware County. He was thinking specifically about a cooperative purchasing and marketing association and this tended to focus the discussion. Afterwards by a series of questions and answers the philosophy and workings of cooperative associations were brought out. Mr. Ryburn stood up to make his opening remarks and then introduced the county supervisor who very briefly sketched FSA's position in the County. He said FSA was interested primarily in all low income farmers and could make loans to individuals and groups if there was a real need for them.

Mr. Massey was then introduced and discussed briefly the desirability of neighbors getting together to discuss their problems. He emphasized the value of such informal groups as the present meeting and explained some of the salient features of the cooperative program of FSA.

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1/ It appears that the entire process is expedited when some tentative outline of the meeting is thought out beforehand. This should not prevent a high degree of spontaneity but should be suggestive only; this is particularly important when strangers are present since some time must be spent in establishing their place in the meeting.

Mr. Ryburn then explained his own problem with reference to feed for dairy cattle and chickens. Most of the other farmers had similar interests. They were well agreed that it was a real problem. One farmer had heard of a cooperative association in Joplin, Missouri, and stated that he listened to their radio program every week. He thought it sounded much like the proposal which some were advancing in the County to facilitate purchasing and marketing. It sounded to him like a good idea.

In the discussion which followed questions concerning volume of business, whether a cooperative should operate at a profit or not, what feeds were needed, and the type and size of organization were raised and some general understanding reached. It was pointed out that in almost every instance where cooperatives have failed it has been due in part to lack of active interest and participation by the members.

A few of the neighbors were afraid of a large cooperative organization but thought it would be well to start a community cooperative first and let the larger organization evolve out of a number of small groups. 2/

When volume of feed was discussed the following exchange took place:

"How much feed will you need, Mr. Stanley?"

"Now wait a minute! Before we get down to figuring how much feed we'll need, I'm going to have to do a little figuring with my wife. She knows how much those chickens will need this winter."

"Yep, that's right! It's going to take a little "cooperating" right at home before we answer that question."

Definite steps were taken to consider plans for starting a cooperative feed purchasing association, first on a community basis and then on a county-wide basis. However, since the whole idea was new to most of the group they thought they should talk it over with other neighbors. One farmer was commissioned by the group to investigate the cooperative association in Missouri and report on it at the next meeting.

A temporary chairman and secretary were elected to serve only until all the other neighbors were drawn in. They deferred selecting a delegate to represent them at any larger meeting that might be held

2/ In other words, some of those present realized the size of the job ahead in mobilizing the entire County behind a county-wide association. As an alternative to the over-all cooperative association they could readily grasp the possibility of starting the cooperative first among neighbors. In this manner it could get under way almost immediately.

until the next meeting night which was set for the following week. Although Mr. Ryburn invited them back they saw the wisdom of passing the meeting place around from neighbor to neighbor and Mr. Stanley's place was finally chosen.

The women took more part in this discussion than in the first group described, although their comments were usually in response to their husband's questions about poultry feed or some other matter pertaining to the home farm.

The general discussion closed at midnight with plans to write up the minutes and make a carbon copy for transmittal to the county supervisor.

After the meeting one of the farm women suggested that all the women could come and do quilting and visiting. The women seemed to feel a real need for more social contacts in the neighborhood and more recreation for young and old. 3/ As one put it, "We aren't going to be able to run to town to a show every time we want to now. We're going to have to provide our own recreation."

Case Study C

Neighborhood: Unnamed
Community: Cloudscreek
County: Delaware

This "neighborhood" is located in the Clouds Creek bottom land. Rugged hills and woods hem it in on all sides but the alluvial plain is fertile and some of the more successful farmers reside there.

The neighborhood is a part of the Clouds Creek School District and has little distinctive reality in the minds of the farm families. It consists of about 10 farm families, all of whom were invited by Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Gibbons to attend a meeting at their home on the night of July 29, 1942. However, only one farmer actually showed up for this meeting.

3/ From the standpoint of FSA the possibilities of group supervision as a supplement to the informal neighborhood discussion group programs seem unlimited. The social isolation which is felt so keenly by many farm families in the low income groups can be partially overcome through group discussion and action. Many inefficient habits can be modified when neighbors themselves impose sanctions.

An illustration of this is contained in the following statement by one of the Delaware County home supervisors upon her first visit to a home where a neighborhood discussion was being held: "I've got to admit it was the first time I ever visited the home when the floor was scrubbed clean, a clean spread was on the bed, and the lamp chimney was shiny and clean. I guess they were looking forward to the meeting."

Everyone in the area was busy with harvesting crops and this undoubtedly had its influence on the lack of attendance. Mr. Gibbons himself furnished another clue to the situation by frankly stating that he is relatively new in the neighborhood, having come from Indiana 2 years ago. Furthermore, Mr. Gibbons was a student at Purdue University.

The two farmers and Mrs. Gibbons spoke briefly of the lack of cooperation in the neighborhood and the real need for more neighborliness.

One person said, "Seems like everyone here is fighting each other."

Another suggested that if a meeting were held at the school house it would "attract a crowd out of curiosity." A meeting there seemed "bigger" to him and more impressive. But he admitted it wouldn't be satisfactory to try to hold an informal neighborhood discussion group at the school house.

The two families decided to try another meeting but in the meantime they proposed to visit one of the other discussion meetings in the County in order to see how it operated. Plans were accordingly made for the two men to attend a meeting in Rattlesnake Hollow on the following night. Both families were FSA borrowers. 1/

Case Study D

Neighborhood: Rattlesnake Hollow

Community: Eucha

County: Delaware

Mr. and Mrs. W. C. Blair invited ten of their neighbors to meet with them on July 30, 1942, at 9:00 p.m. The Blair house is located on the main county road and is still in process of being built. Mr. Blair does much of the carpentry himself and it is a long process. Mr. Blair is referred to as "Preacher" Blair by his neighbors and the terms "Brother" and "Sister" are in common usage in the neighborhood. These affectionate greetings added much to the friendly atmosphere in which the meeting opened.

The meeting began about 9:30 p.m. Mr. Blair asked a neighboring farmer to make the opening remarks. This man summed up very well the

1/ This unsuccessful meeting illustrates the necessity for some detailed analysis of the neighborhood situation before starting the neighborhood discussion group program. If by chance a county staff had been so unfortunate as to select this neighborhood for the initial meeting the entire program might have been jeopardized by the ignominious start and the conclusion would seem justified that, "People in this County just won't meet together. You can't get them out to meetings."

general situation of the farmers in Delaware County. He said the large number of small units made it imperative that they cooperate to market their fruits and vegetables. He mentioned that just recently a trucker had contacted a number of farmers in his neighborhood and had picked up a load of string beans of several different varieties. The trucker took this load to town and sold it for \$100 per ton. This suggested that if a number of bean growers could get together and buy the same variety of seed and plan their production they might command a better price in the market.

One farmer told about his experience in the first cooperative association in Comanche County, Texas, in the late 90's. The group was unanimous in expressing a need for some kind of cooperative effort. At times the meeting took on the semblance of a "revival" meeting. One farmer would give his experiences with cooperation and invariably a number of them would reaffirm his statements with a "That's right," or "It's our only salvation."

Another farmer told a little story somewhat as follows:

"I had a few bushels of potatoes to sell but not enough to get a trucker to come out into my neighborhood. I talked to two of my neighbors and they had a few bushels, too. Together we had enough for a carload. I went into town and told a trucker we had a load of potatoes we wanted to sell out in our neighborhood. He came out and got them and we received \$2.25 a bushel for them. Otherwise, I would have taken my potatoes out to the hogs."

A cannery was suggested as something that was needed in the neighborhood but the question of securing machinery was immediately raised. It was decided to leave this question open for discussion later on.

Mr. Massey of the regional FSA office described how a cooperative association functioned. His explanation seemed to appeal to the group as a practical means of helping themselves. It was impossible to determine off-hand how much feed each family would need during the coming year. This suggested the necessity for additional information and for some continuing organization. Accordingly, a chairman and secretary were elected, the latter office in this case being filled by a woman. 1/

In Rattlesnake Hollow neighborhood there was a noticeable tendency for women to take a more active part in the proceedings. The four farm women attending visited in the house for a while but when the discussion started they took chairs by an open window which overlooked

1/ Perhaps a woman should be suggested in all neighborhood groups to serve in some official capacity. It would give overt recognition to the desirability of drawing the entire family into the discussion.

the circle of men outside. Now and then they took part in the discussion. A number of children were observed at play in the house and in the yard.

The selection of a delegate to represent the neighborhood at a larger meeting was left until the next meeting which was set for the following Thursday at another neighbor's house.

Just before the meeting broke up a World War veteran made a plea for old phonograph records and scrap iron. He gave detailed instructions as to how to dispose of the material. 2/

It was decided that before the next meeting the neighborhood families would estimate the number of bushels of peaches they wanted and one individual would make arrangements to get a load trucked into the neighborhood. Finally, they agreed to come to some estimate of their individual feed requirements for the coming year and report at the next meeting.

Mr. Blair said that anything worth doing was worth recording and suggested that the minutes of each meeting be written in detail with two carbon copies, the original to stay in the official file, one copy to the delegate and one copy to the FSA office.

The discussion broke up at about 12:00 midnight.

In discussing the neighborhood customs with the women the visitors were informed that the women tended to "stay close to home." They do their canning individually and have no quilting or sewing parties. Quoting one of the women: "They (the women) just stay at home and work and go to Sunday School and Church."

Mrs. Blair had prepared a generous supply of lemonade and after the meeting everyone went to the kitchen to fill up. This promoted a general atmosphere of neighborliness and brought husbands and wives as well as the children together.

Neighborhood Discussion Groups in Relation to the FSA Program

Good morale is just as essential on the "home front" as on the battlefield. A chief factor in good morale is the active participation of the individual in the activities of the group, whether it be an army, a group of factory employees or a rural neighborhood. Democracy is predicated on free discussion and voluntary cooperation in the solution of common problems rather than on the imposition of a plan of action formulated from above.

2/ This suggests a practical use of the neighborhood discussion groups as a means for keeping low income farm families well informed on the various war programs.

Many students have noted the declining importance of the rural neighborhood under the impacts of an increasingly commercial economy and the development of modern methods of transportation and communication. As a result of these changes some of the tested values of our democracy are in danger of being lost. Frequent complaints are made of a lack of leadership and the decline of initiative and cooperative effort in rural communities. Many farm people, especially among the low income groups, have lost the habit of meeting and working together and consequently lack self-confidence and a vital feeling of "belonging" to their communities. In other words, they are socially isolated and their morale is low.

The Farm Security Administration is trying to reverse this trend through the encouragement of group participation among its borrowers. The importance of these efforts has been greatly increased by the necessities of war. For example, shortages of rubber, machinery and farm labor make it imperative that farmers work together as never before to solve their common problems. At the same time, farm and home supervisors are finding it increasingly difficult to maintain their customary contacts with individual farm families. Thus the practical necessities of the present situation as well as the effective economic and social rehabilitation of the borrower encourage increased reliance on the group approach.

There is reason to believe that a program of discussion groups can do much to aid in the establishment of a firm foundation upon which various phases of the FSA program can be developed. The following generalizations are suggested by experience with discussion groups in Delaware County and elsewhere:

1. Low income farm people are genuinely interested in discovering practical means for improving their economic status.
2. They have shown a willingness to meet together for informal discussion of their common needs and problems.
3. Through small discussion groups neighbors have demonstrated their ability to identify problems and reach agreement on practical programs of action.
4. Such groups are particularly helpful in developing an understanding of the theory and practice of cooperatives so essential to the success of enterprises of this type.
5. Discussion in small neighborhood groups provides an excellent opportunity for the frank exchange of information and ideas between farm families and administrative and supervisory personnel.

The FSA program seeks to help low income families to improve their income and standards of living. It is recognized, however, that complete

"rehabilitation" is much more than an economic problem. Social and psychological factors are also involved and cannot be separated from the economic. This fact is illustrated by the following comments made by members of the County staff in Delaware County:

"These people have developed an 'inferiority complex' and have some 'bad habits' that are difficult to overcome."

"Money alone won't solve our problems. Some of these people have got to be jarred out of their lethargy."

Social and economic rehabilitation go hand in hand and there is reason to believe that the discussion group program can contribute much to both phases of the rehabilitation process. On the social and psychological side there is evidence that discussion groups can help in the following ways:

1. Develop a spirit of cooperation among neighbors.
2. Reduce the social isolation of low income farm families.
3. Aid in the discovery and development of new leadership.
4. Stimulate confidence and self-respect on the part of all participants.
5. Help to maintain morale and mobilize rural neighborhoods as effective units in a democracy at war.



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